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Elusive equity: education reform in post-apartheid south Africa

Karen L. Biraimah
University of Central Florida

Vietnam, and Pit Chamnan and David Ford for Cambodia) examine the issues of quality, equity, institutional autonomy, underfunding, and the mismatch between higher education and the labor market.

Beyond what has been elaborated, a challenge for the latter two groups of countries seems to be finding an appropriate balance between government control and market forces for public and private higher education. Current, bureaucratically controlled public institutions, on the one hand, and unregulated, profit-driven private institutions, on the other, are inefficient ways of serving national developmental goals.

With eleven country cases, this volume truly reflects the diversity and dynamism occurring in Asian universities. However, given the intention of the editors to describe their dramatic transformations, it is surprising that universities of Central Asia and the Middle East are entirely absent from this volume. The representation of Asia in terms of both problems and geography would be more complete if countries from those regions were included. Despite this limitation, this book remains an invaluable reference. The problems, descriptions, and contextual information provided by the authors offer fertile terrain for future scholarship in this area. Presenting current realities alongside past influences makes this collection both interesting and readable.

JAVZAN SUKHBAATAR

Pennsylvania State University

Elusive Equity: Education Reform in Post-apartheid South Africa edited by Edward B. Fiske and Helen F. Ladd. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004. 269 pp. $32.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-8157-2840-9.

When reflecting upon education as a tool for social reform or repression, the saga of postapartheid education reform in South Africa is in a league of its own. While the challenges, triumphs, and defeats enmeshed within this brief period may be shared to some extent by others, the sheer magnitude of South Africa's educational goals, the incredible pace of its reform agenda, and the immensity of the social, historical, economic, and political challenges placed in its path are certainly without modern precedent. Likewise, any attempt to analyze this vibrant yet nascent reform movement provides its own set of challenges and limitations. Scholars who attempt such a daunting endeavor take on a task that is not only Herculean but is also prime for criticism from both the ardent supporters and detractors of education reform within postapartheid South Africa. Moreover, these challenges may be exacerbated when the authors are white North Americans whose research methodology tends to treat schools as "black boxes," where education reforms and school outcomes are measured without concomitant and sustained engagement with the in-school experiences responsible for transforming inputs into outputs. While this "black box" approach may yield successful research within education institutions and agencies, it can also place authors in a precarious position, as in the case of

South Africa, where powerful nuances and caveats necessary for the contextualization of postapartheid education reforms can be fully appreciated only through intensive lived experiences within the school culture. Moreover, given that South Africa has only recently emerged from a lengthy era of apartheid, any analysis of education reforms is at best preliminary, though certainly a necessary and welcome first step.

The authors of *Elusive Equity: Education Reform in Post-apartheid South Africa*, Edward B. Fiske and Helen F. Ladd, have accepted these challenges, while making no claim to a sustained academic association with South Africa or, for that matter, with African education. Neither is an Africanist or comparativist (Ladd is an academic economist and policy analyst whose work has focused on education reform within the United States, and Fiske is an educational journalist). These limitations notwithstanding, *Elusive Equity* is based on the authors' analysis of South African education statistics and policy documents, academic literature, interviews with academics and policy makers, and limited school visits during a seven-month stay in the Cape region of South Africa in 2002, where Ladd held a Fulbright lecturing and research grant at the University of Cape Town. Hence, most examples and generalizations in the book are based on a comparison of the wealthier Western Cape province and the poorer Eastern Cape province.

When gauging the appropriateness and quality of such a work, however, it should be noted that the authors have openly recognized both the limitations and promises of their contribution, as compared with that of their South African colleagues, when stating that, although "we cannot claim to have the insight that many of them possess from their years of direct experience in South Africa, we bring the independence and objectivity of informed outsiders and, we hope, the skills required to do justice to the complex story of educational transformation in South Africa" (xi). Readers of *Elusive Equity* must decide for themselves if Fiske and Ladd have achieved this goal. In any case, the authors provide a balanced and thorough preliminary analysis of education reforms during the first postapartheid decade within South Africa and state that the purpose of their book is "to describe the country's post-apartheid strategies for transforming its education system in the context of the nation's history and to evaluate their success in promoting a more racially equitable system" (3).

To this end, the authors have examined the period from the early 1990s through 2002, using the racial equity standards of equal treatment, equal educational opportunity, and education adequacy to evaluate South Africa's education reform strategies. In the introductory chapters the authors provide readers with important context for understanding South Africa's postapartheid education reforms, beginning with a discussion of concepts such as racial equity and equal treatment in education and then launching into South Africa's history of colonialism and apartheid (a necessity for those readers less familiar with the South African context) and education's pivotal role in first supporting, and then later challenging and helping to defeat, apartheid. They also discuss reasons for apartheid's lingering impact on education as evidenced by the continuing factors of poverty, racial segregation, and the absence of an adequate "culture of learning."

The authors describe the heart of *Elusive Equity* as their analysis of South Africa's efforts to reform the school sector. They address the issues of governance and

access to schooling, with an eye to evaluating South Africa's deracialized but not necessarily equal-access education system, including the controversial decision to allow former white schools to remain disproportionately white through the support of local school-governing bodies. The authors' interest in economics and policy studies clearly addresses the challenges and constraints related to equitable school-financing schemes, as well as the growing tensions within a postapartheid society that must balance public and private resources for schooling, while providing the best possible education for the greater good.

Moving beyond an analysis of educational inputs that include various economic, political, and social realities, *Elusive Equity* also focuses on aspects of curriculum and instruction selected by South African educators to distance themselves from their apartheid past. For example, Fiske and Ladd discuss the relationship between Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) and equity and underscore the need for an education agenda that focuses on the child, promotes active learning, and acknowledges the need for a curriculum of liberation. They also suggest that, while OBE was initially seen as the most reasonable approach to the achievement of educational reform, it may be better suited to wealthier schools that have sufficient resources and well-trained teachers, for "equal treatment does not translate into equal opportunity when some schools are resource-poor" (172).

Though this presents a rather abrupt departure from previous chapters (which address primary and secondary education), Fiske and Ladd choose to include a chapter that underscores the problems inherent in the transformation of South Africa's system of higher education as the country began a merger of historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions into one deracialized system. Rightly so, *Elusive Equity* has concentrated on the plight of the underfunded historically disadvantaged institutions that lost their student base to former privileged white institutions and the lingering regret that historically disadvantaged institutions were never properly redressed for the inequities of apartheid.

In summing up the last decade of education reform in postapartheid South Africa, Fiske and Ladd suggest that the country has made progress in some areas, such as the rolling out of an OBE curriculum, yet that it has been less successful in promoting equal educational opportunity for all students or in providing an adequate educational system in a country whose education has been benchmarked by high repetition and dropout rates and low pass rates for black students. When constructing this balance sheet, however, the authors have correctly included critical factors such as the legacy of apartheid, the devastation to families and the economy by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the decision to allow for a significant level of self-governance among South African schools, which encouraged restrictive school fees and admission policies.

The authors conclude their work by suggesting that postapartheid education reform in South Africa "is still very much a work in progress," yet one that has already yielded valuable insights and lessons learned for the greater educational development community (238). These include the notions that history and financial resources truly matter, as does the cultivation of cultural and human capital. They also conclude that the most important lesson to be learned from this unprecedented social experiment in South Africa is that "equal treatment is not sufficient as a guiding principle of equity" (248).

While most Africanists, and certainly those focusing on South African education and history, will quickly identify a series of small errors, such as the labeling of Vista as a technikon (postsecondary technical school) rather than a university, *Elusive Equity* remains a compelling analysis that is, in the main, both appropriate and accurate. The book is a solid introductory piece of research on the complex aspects of education reform in postapartheid South Africa but one that needs to be enriched through the inclusion of reflective voices from the classroom.

KAREN L. BIRAIMAH

University of Central Florida

Disrupting Preconceptions: Postcolonialism and Education edited by Anne Hickling-Hudson, Julie Matthews, and Annette Woods. Brisbane: Post Pressed, 2004. 264 pp. $45.33. ISBN 1-876682-56-6.

"Postcolonialism" is indeed a nebulous term. It can be defined temporally as the aftermath of colonization in the periphery, in which political control by European or other empires has ended, but newly independent states remain within a global system of economic and cultural domination in which the former colonizers retain their hegemony. An even more capacious definition views postcolonialism as part of a worldwide dialectic of oppression and resistance in all of its myriad forms—postcolonial subjects have identities that are also gendered, sexual, religious, and linguistic. Postcolonialism can also be defined as an oppositional position that combats legacies of colonial domination by discerning strategies of resistance to neocolonial powers. In *Disrupting Preconceptions*, a collection of thirteen essays that address postcolonialism in education, the editors have selected conference papers that embrace, to varying degrees, each of these definitions.

Editors Anne Hickling-Hudson, Julie Matthews, and Annette Woods provide an informative introduction to postcolonial theories and their uses for the study of education, and they view postcolonialism as an approach that both "highlight[s] the ambiguous nature of [educational] change" and "seeks to disrupt the cultural beliefs, logics, and theories in which education systems are embedded" (7). Although the editors envision an education audience for their book, those engaged in postcolonial studies who belong to other disciplines could also benefit from it. The book is divided into three sections: articles that investigate oppression and resistance from the standpoint of postcolonial subjects, those that explore the lingering effects of colonial empires, and those that consider the intersections of the postcolonial with other identities. It includes an afterword by Allan Luke.

Held at the University of Queensland in 2001, the conference illustrates a well-known paradox of postcolonial scholarship. The presenters examine the postcolonial in educational structures and practices in Asia, Africa, North America, and Australia, but the colonial legacy remains—the language of the conference is English, the publisher is Australian, and the book is printed in Great Britain. Perhaps this collection serves as an example of what Robert J. C. Young, in his